

Matthew 6:1-13

¹“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Concerning Prayer

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Your Mother Was Half Right

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: *Matthew 6:1-14*

The year was 1965. It was a heady and turbulent time. In 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated in Harlem. In 1965 the great riots in Watts killed 34 people. In 1965 25,000 people marched on Washington DC to protest the war in Vietnam and hundreds publicly burned their draft cards. And despite the rising dissent, in 1965 the president, Lyndon Johnson, committed 50,000 additional soldiers to the war, twice the number march that marched on Washington against the war. In 1965 the gargantuan issues of race, poverty, and war took over the forefront of the American psyche.

And so it was that many in those days were amazed when ladybird Johnson, the president's wife, began to mission to beautify America. With blood in the streets, and even more blood being spilled in a war on the other side of the world that few could understand, many were incredulous that the First Lady was embarking on a campaign to pick up litter. Picking trash up on the side of the highway seemed a small thing to pay attention to, especially since there was a rising feeling that so many important issues of our time were receiving less attention than they needed.

In 1965 we weren't just seeing a divide developing on the war in Vietnam, or the issues of race, or the issues of poverty. We were also seeing a divide between activism and a more gentle civility. A few noted that activism and civility belonged together. There is a wonderful story told by a former parishioner here, and I understand that it took place in this congregation. There was a graduate student at Fletcher School of Government. He was an arrogant sort. He lectured those who would listen, and those who wouldn't, about the solutions to the world's problems. He claimed that his schooling and his intelligence allowed him to know just what to do with the world. As you may imagine, he did not endear himself to many. But the thing that really cost him his credibility was the way he treated his wife. The person who told the story said, "If he couldn't manage the relationship with his wife properly, why should we imagine that he could manage the affairs and relationships of the world?"

It was a good insight. But in the end, I think it is fair to say that in those days nastiness won out over civility and manners. And we still feel the effects of the sea change in attitudes that began in those days. This year the ethicist Ralph Potter retired from the Harvard Divinity School. Ralph often taught courses on manners and civility, but they hardly ever attracted more than a handful of students. They were considered fluff. Even now, 35 years after 1965, politeness and civility are seen by some to be antithetical to significant discourse.

For many of us in my generation this development played out in our families in what was often called the generation gap. My mother, as you may imagine, lined up on the side of civility. I, on the other hand, said that civility was a farce if at the same time we were decidedly uncivil in the way that we faced the major issues of our day, if we were uncivil in imperialist warfare, if we were uncivil in matters of race, if we were uncivil in the way we treated the poorest in our

society. In retrospect, I suspect that we were both right. We needed honest criticism, but it was not necessary to sacrifice the civility in the process. But we did, and I truly regret the loss of simple civility and politeness in our society that continues to wreak havoc.

I now have far more appreciation for the things that my mother taught me: to eat the things on my plate, to be polite, to say thank you, to write thank you notes when I get a gift, to treat people with respect, things like that. They are good and important things to do that have far greater impact than it may seem at first glance. My guess is that we would be closer today to a world living in peace if we had put a higher premium on respect for one another. My mother was right, and I bet yours was too.

But Jesus gives us an interesting look at the other side of the issue. My mother taught me respect and gratitude and deferring to my elders. Presumably, then, my mother also taught me to expect those very same things, especially when I became an adult: respect, gratitude, and deference. And it's here that Jesus seems to disagree. Jesus tells his hearers that expecting honor and gratitude for the things they do means that they are hypocritical, that they are doing things just for show. He says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." He says that when you give alms you should not do it so that you can be praised by others. Jesus implies that if the reward you seek is praise and gratitude, then there is no reward for you in heaven.

That's a pretty harsh message. If you expect gratitude for the things that you do, then you have no reward in heaven. I suppose a reasonable paraphrase would be, if you expect gratitude for the things that you do, then God is not very happy with you. This is not exactly what I would have expected from what my mother taught me. It seems we have a paradox. Kindness and respect are good things to give, but conversely, they are not good things to expect to receive. What is going on here?

Well, for one, I think Jesus had a moral issue in mind. Jesus asked, should your ability to give mean that you should get special treatment? Are honor and gratitude and respect the special domain of the well-to-do? What about those who do not have the means to put others in their debt? Are they less to be honored? Are they less important? Jesus seems to have found a number of flaws in the expectation of honor and gratitude. Some have said that Jesus has a preferential option for the poor. That's about the opposite of treating the well off with preference.

I think Jesus would be a lousy development officer, you know those people who are fundraisers for organizations. Development officers know how to shmooze. If you give them the money, they get buildings named after you, they get plaques with your name on it set up in prominent places. They make sure that you are fully honored. No Jesus would not have been a good development officer, maybe not even a good stewardship chair. Jesus was not much into building up egos, or at least you couldn't buy respect and honor from him.

But this does not mean that Jesus did not care for people? First, as we have seen, Jesus has high regard for all people, and so he is against any special honor for those with riches, or those who are the most pious. Jesus is for all people, but he is for hypocrisy in no people. But this is not simply because hypocritical people irritate Jesus. I don't know if they do or not. But I do know that Jesus cares for even them. Recall that some of the people he chastised the most were his own beloved disciples when they were hypocritical or obtuse. So what else is going on here?

As we read the Gospel stories, we see a number of clues in Jesus' interactions with his

disciples. When his disciples begin to dream of the reward that they will receive for doing the right thing, for following him, at that very point, they begin to lose their focus. And James and John want good seats in heaven as their reward, they have lost sight of Jesus' message. Jesus says if you go to a dinner party, don't seek out the seat of honor. He says when you pray, don't pray to be noticed. And the reason is simple. When you go to a dinner party and think about being honored, you are no longer paying attention to the dinner party. When you pray to be noticed, you are no longer paying attention to prayer. When you give alms with the expectation of gratitude, your focus is no longer on generosity.

Jesus is aware that the ego is a voracious eater. Fed a diet of empty sweets, like the rest of us it blossoms out of all proportion. And when the ego grows too large, it leaves little room for anything else. Jesus knows that things like prayer and respect and generosity are among the most important things in life. They shape us into people whose hearts are golden, whose satisfaction comes from an inner peace, whose happiness is not dependent on accolades and receiving preferences. Indeed, Jesus suggests that seeking out honor and preference, privilege and gratitude from others lead to an addictive and a false sense of happiness, a sense of happiness that is never really there, that remains always just out of grasp. And that is not because you can't quite reach it. It is because it is a mirage that you are chasing after.

There is a story from the early Christian desert fathers. The desert fathers were very early Christian ascetics. In this story we meet Abbot Anastasius and a brother in the monastery. It goes like this:

Abbot Anastasius had a book written on very fine parchment which was worth eighteen pence, and had in it both the Old and New Testaments in full. Once a certain brother came to visit him, and seeing the book made off with it. So that day when Abbot Anastasius went to read his book, and found that it was gone, he realized that the brother had taken it. But he did not send after him to inquire about it for fear that the brother might add perjury to theft. Well, the brother went down into the nearby city in order to sell the book. And the price he asked was sixteen pence. The buyer said: Give me the book that I may find out whether it is worth that much. With that, the buyer took the book to the holy Anastasius and said: Father, take a look at this book, please, and tell me whether you think I ought to buy it for sixteen pence. Is it worth that much? Abbot Anastasius said: Yes, it is a fine book, it is worth that much. So the buyer went back to the brother and said: Here is your money I showed the book to Abbot Anastasius and he said it is a fine book and is worth at least sixteen pence. But the brother asked: Was that all he said? Did he make any other remarks? No, said the buyer, he did not say another word. Well, said the brother, I have changed my mind and I don't want to sell this book after all. Then he hastened to Abbot Anastasius and begged him with tears to take back his book, but the Abbot would not accept it, saying: Go in peace, brother, I make you a present of it. But the brother said: If you do not take it back I shall never have any peace. After that the brother dwelt with Abbot Anastasius for the rest of his life.

Abbot Anastasius finds his happiness in life not by regard or honor. He can find it even the loving treatment of a thieving brother. In the end, both Abbot Anastasius and the brother are better off because of it.

My mother was right. It is good to give generously, to express gratitude and to have decent manners. Jesus would agree, but then he would say, just don't concentrate on receiving them, for what is good to give can be very bad to lust after. It then becomes another thing altogether.

Amen.

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